



SPECIAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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SPECIAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS DEFINED

Several states have organized special school districts to:

- deliver special education services to severely challenged students in specialized settings and
- centralize service providers and programs for use across local districts in mainstream classrooms.

QUESTION

Provide examples of states that have special school districts, and explain how they are organized and funded.

SUMMARY

Louisiana, Missouri, and New Jersey permit the formation of special school districts to provide special education services to students. Although these states organize and fund their special school districts differently, they follow similar service principles. Special school districts enroll students with severe needs whose needs cannot be met by local districts, or they regionalize special education staff to disperse among local districts to deliver services, or both.

While Louisiana's district is created and entirely funded by the state, Missouri's two districts are organized by voters at the local level and funded through a variety of sources. New Jersey has eight special services school districts at the county level, which do not receive state aid and are funded by tuition payments paid by sending districts.

Although states organize special school districts, federal special education law governs student enrollment in schools run by these districts. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that all students eligible for special education must be placed in the "least restrictive environment," commonly known as "mainstreaming." Separate schooling in special school district schools may only occur if a student's disability is so severe that mainstream classes, along with help from aids and services, cannot educate the student satisfactorily (20 USC § 1412(a)(5)).

LOUISIANA

Organization

The Louisiana State Legislature established one Special School District containing three residential schools and special school programs that provide academic, vocational, and other related services. The Special School District is comprised of the Louisiana School for the Deaf, the Louisiana School for the Visually Impaired, and the Louisiana Special Education Center. Each of these schools operates year-round (La. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 1945).

Table 1 explains the services offered by each special school.

Table 1: Services Offered by Louisiana's Special Schools

<i>Special School</i>	<i>Services Provided</i>
Louisiana School for the Deaf	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Comprehensive Pre-K through 12 education for deaf and hard-of-hearing children ages 3-21 who reside in Louisiana• Instruction in a bilingual environment of American Sign Language and English
Louisiana School for the Visually Impaired	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Educational programs for Louisiana children who are blind or visually impaired
Louisiana Special Education Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Services for orthopedic-impaired students ages 3-32• Vocational training and transitional services for students aged 14-32

The Louisiana Special School District also oversees the special school programs, which provide educational services via four programs: (1) Citizens with Developmental Disabilities, (2) Behavioral and Mental Health, (3) Juvenile Centers for Youth, and (4) Adult Corrections. These programs are delivered to eligible students who are under the jurisdiction of the Office of Youth Development, Office of Behavioral Health, Office of Developmental Disabilities, Department of Public Safety and Corrections, private facilities, and the Louisiana Special Schools.

The district is organized as an education service agency administered by Louisiana's Department of Education (La. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 1945). The state superintendent of education appoints the district superintendent, subject to Senate confirmation (La. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 648.1).

Funding

For students enrolled in special schools within the Special School District, state law requires the state to fund the cost of special education and related services (La. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 17:1947). The Special School District has no authority to levy taxes (La. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 17:1945).

MISSOURI

Organization

Missouri's statutes allow voters to petition for the establishment of special school districts in order to educate and train handicapped and severely handicapped children and also for vocational education purposes (Mo. Rev. Stat. §§ 162.825, 162.895). These districts may establish their own schools for severely disabled students and also provide regionalized special education services to participating local districts.

Geography. A special district does not replace local districts but instead overlays the districts it contains. Geographically, a special school district may (1) include more than one local school district and (2) be established irrespective of county boundaries. However, the boundaries of a special school district must coincide with the boundaries of the school districts which it encompasses (Mo. Rev. Stat. § 162.830).

Petition to form. Voters who wish to establish a special school district must submit a petition to Missouri's State Board of Education (SBE) with signatures from each participating district that are equal to at least 5% of the number of votes cast in the last annual school board election. Within 30 days of receiving the petition, SBE must direct the board of education in each participating district to submit the

proposal at the next municipal election or special election. If the proposal receives a majority of the vote, SBE must review and approve the petition, declare the special district organized, and call an election for a board of education to lead the special district (Mo. Rev. Stat. § 162.825).

Leadership. The leadership model for the special school district depends upon its population. A seven-member board of education leads special school districts with a population up to 100,000 (Mo. Rev. Stat. § 162.855). A governing council is formed for special school districts with a population greater than 100,000. This council consists of one member of the board of education of each school district that is contained in the special school district (Mo. Rev. Stat. § 162.856).

Programs. Missouri's Department of Elementary and Special Education must inspect all programs provided by special school districts (Mo. Rev. Stat. § 162.930). Also, special school districts have the option to contract with other entities that have programs providing special education services, such as SBE, public agencies, or nonprofit organizations (Mo. Rev. Stat. § 162.750).

The two Missouri special school districts are the [Special School District of St. Louis County](#) and the [Pemiscot County Special School District](#). Missouri's Schools for the Severely Disabled ([MSSD](#)) are not part of any special school district. Instead, they are administered by Missouri's SBE through the Office of Special Education. MSSD serves students with severe to profound disabilities who cannot receive appropriate educational services in their local district programs due to the severity of their disability.

Funding

According to the Missouri special school districts' Annual Secretary of the Board Report (ASBR), the special school districts receive local, county, state, and federal revenue. State law sets the operating tax rate for local revenue and also prescribes the formula for calculating state aid.

A special school district must raise local revenue and fulfill certain operating requirements to receive state aid, including:

1. meeting a minimum number of days and hours of actual pupil attendance;
2. maintaining adequate attendance, personnel, and finance records;
3. levying an operating tax of at least \$1.25 on each \$100 assessed valuation of the district; and

4. computing its average daily attendance as prescribed in state law (Mo. Rev. Stat. § 163.021(1)).

The state aid formula for funding special school districts is established in statute (Mo. Rev. Stat. § 162.935(1)). Special school districts are also entitled to receive state transportation aid (Mo. Rev. Stat § 162.900).

NEW JERSEY

Organization

New Jersey law allows a county to establish its own “special services school district” to educate and treat severely disabled children who live within the county (N.J.S.A. § 18A:46-29; 18A:46-31). These children may have any of the following disabilities: intellectual disability; visual, auditory, communication, or orthopedic handicap; neurological or perceptual impairment; chronic illness; emotional disturbance; social maladjustment; autism; or pre-school handicap (N.J.S.A. § 18A:46-1). The special services district may operate dormitories, boarding care facilities, and health care services for pupils (N.J.S.A. § 18a:46-31).

The board of county freeholders (i.e., the county governing body in New Jersey) must hold a public hearing to determine whether a special services school district is needed before authorizing its establishment. Although the district is organized at the county level, New Jersey’s State Board of Education (SBE) retains the authority to make rules and regulations, manage, and control special service schools (N.J.S.A. § 18A:46-30).

Leadership. Each special services district must establish its own board. A seven-member board must include the county superintendent and six people appointed by the director of the freeholders’ board (N.J.S.A. § 18A:46-35).

Programs. New Jersey’s Commissioner of Education approves the programs and courses of study offered by special services districts, with SBE’s advice and consent (N.J.S.A. § 18A: 46-32). Districts must give precedence to pursuing programs for those with unusually severe disabilities or unusual multi-disabilities (N.J.S.A. § 18A:46-33). New Jersey’s [eight special services school districts](#) provide full-time, year-round services.

Funding

New Jersey law allows a special services school district’s board of education to receive funds from two sources: county appropriations and sending district tuition and fees. New Jersey’s Department of Education deducts sending district tuition

from the sending district's state aid and transfers that amount directly to the county special services district. Generally, special services districts do not receive state aid (N.J.S.A. § 18a:46-31).

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